White Lies

Lying, Chapter 5
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Contemporary Moral Problems
Professor Douglas Olena
“Never have I lied in my own interest; but often I have lied through shame in order to draw myself from embarrassment in indifferent matters.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Chapter Outline

- Harmless Lying
- Placebos
- Letters of Recommendation
- Truthfulness at What Price?
Harmless Lying

58 “A white lie, in this sense, is a falsehood not meant to injure anyone, and of little moral import.”

“Are there such lies? If there are, are their cumulative consequences still without harm?”

“Are there lies defended as ‘white’ which are in fact harmful in their own right?”
Harmless Lying

- 58 A social practice: Saying I can’t when I really mean I don’t want to.
- White lies are told to throw a cheerful interpretation on depressing circumstances.
- 59 placebos, inflated grades and recommendations for employment or promotion
Harmless Lying

- 59 The utilitarian claims that white lies are precisely where their theory shows the value of common sense.

- “A white lie, they hold, is trivial; it is either completely harmless, or so marginally harmful that the cost of detecting and evaluating the harm is much greater than the minute harm itself.”
Harmless Lying

- 60 “Because lines are so hard to draw, the indiscriminate use of such lies can lead to other deceptive practices.”
- “The aggregate harm from a large number of marginally harmful instances may, therefore, be highly undesirable in the end—for liars, those deceived, and honesty and trust more generally.”
Placebos

- 61 “The common practice of prescribing placebos to unwitting patients illustrates the two miscalculations so common to minor forms of deceit:
  - Ignoring possible harm
  - Failing to see how gestures assumed to be trivial build up into collectively undesirable practices.”
Placebos

- 62 “After all, health professionals argue, are not placebos far less dangerous than some genuine drugs?”
- “And more likely to produce a cure than if nothing at all is prescribed?”
Placebos

- “In the aggregate, the costs of placebos are immense.”
- “Many millions of dollars are expended on drugs, diagnostic tests, and psychotherapies of a placeboic nature.”
- Operations...
Placebos

- 63-65 Deception about tranquilizers to distraught teen.
- 66 Concerning the use of effective compounds instead of inert placebos: “It is important for both the doctor and the patient to believe in the treatment.”
Placebos

- 67 Placebo use while testing the side effects of birth control pills...
- 67, 68 “When the costs and benefits are weighed, not only the individual consequences must be considered, but also the cumulative ones.”
Placebos

- 68 “This is not to say that all placebos must be ruled out, merely that they cannot be excused as innocuous.”
- Used only after consideration of non-deceptive alternatives
- Used in research only after fully informed consent
Letters of Recommendation

- 68 Deceitfulness in letters of recommendation is another area where the cumulative effect is damaging to the level of trust in society.

- The practice damages those whose recommendations are not written to compensate for the inflated ones that have to be competed against.
Letters of Recommendation

- 69 For a professor to say that the individual is in the top 60% is tantamount to saying that the individual is at the bottom of their class.
- “Honesty might victimize innocent persons.”
Letters of Recommendation

- 70 “No one can know what is meant by a particular rating.”
- “While it may be demeaning to participate in the inflated practices, it is hard to resist them single handedly.”
- The U. S. Army unsuccessfully instituted reform in this area.
Truthfulness at What Price?

71 “One can’t dismiss lies merely by explaining that they don’t matter.”

“More often than not they do matter, even when looked at in the simple terms of harm and benefit.”

Read paragraph on 72.